

2.12.18 author's copy 2072

# AN EDITOR'S IMPRESSIONS

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## America Picturesque. A Visit to the Academy.

BY


HENRY BLACKBURN,

LATE EDITOR OF "LONDON SOCIETY," AND OF THE CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION.  
AUTHOR OF "ART IN THE MOUNTAINS," "NORMANDY PICTURESQUE," "ARTISTS AND ARABS,"  
ETC., ETC.

NEW YORK:  
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS.

1873.

PRICE, 25 CENTS.



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## I. AMERICA PICTURESQUE

### SKETCHING IN BLACK AND WHITE.

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[Reprinted, with additions, from the "EVENING POST."]

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Coming on an art mission to America—to see and describe the living art of its people—official duties connected with the International Exhibition of Pictures at the Academy of Design, have kept me so closely to task that I have not until to-day found time to record even the first impressions of "America Picturesque." But they began on the steamship *Cuba*, between Liverpool and New York.

In the stormy passage there is one day's interval of comparative calm, of sunshine and rest. The ship still rolls heavily, and so, to keep steady and secure, a group of little children are collected in the middle of a large coil of rope near the fore-castle. They are singing to one of your favorite airs a rather startling song, involving a most unnecessary warning to our good captain, recording how—

"Noah was chatting of this and that,  
When bump he went against Ararat."

Seated a little apart are two figures, one a fair English child, seven years old, dressed in white, with a blue

hood of the Red Ridinghood pattern, and by her side Kalulu—the negro boy who came to America with Stanley, the discoverer of Dr. Livingstone. The sun shines upon these two figures, upon the awe-struck face of the child and the delighted Kalulu, upon the weather-beaten mast against which they lean, and upon the sea which rises and falls behind them. The picture is complete for a painter and suggestive from other points of view. If, for instance, an intelligent monkey were on board and sat down on the other side of Kalulu, would there appear at first sight a greater natural affinity between Kalulu and the beautiful child, than with his intelligent neighbor on the other side of him—especially if the latter wore the costume of modern civilization in which Kalulu is now adorned? I said “at first sight,” for surely here the matter ends in spite of Darwin’s latest theories. “Costume has much to do with it,” say Dr. Livingstone, who amuses himself in Central Africa by a picture in his mind of the figures of Darwin, Owen and other great men, dressed like Indians with a belt of feathers; but neither costume nor civilization affect the unalterable law which gives Kalulu the light of reason and the Divine form of hands and feet. He was imitating the motions of a monkey a moment ago, to amuse the child, and the action of his limbs was curiously animal, but now he is describing his wanderings with his master and pointing out his own portrait in the *Graphic* newspaper. Shall we find on the American continent many unquestioning disciples of Charles Darwin?

In ten days we sight land, and at three o’clock in the morning the pilot knocks at our door and tells us that Boston is burned to ashes. Several half-ruined men in the state cabin get up on hearing the news, dress them-

selves deliberately, and during breakfast, reconstruct their city. They lay down new streets, build larger warehouses and pave the way to make larger fortunes than before. All this sounds like a dream, but it is enacted before our eyes. The strangest sight, however (to an Englishman and an editor), is yet to come. As we enter your beautiful harbor there comes towards us a press steam-yacht with a little red flag at the mast-head, bearing the words "Welcome Stanley;" and a packet of newspapers is brought on board containing elaborate illustrations of the Boston fire, from every possible and impossible point of view. The first impression is one of astouishment at the unnecessary amount of labor and talent bestowed upon these drawings, to chronicle so many phases of the calamity; and this brings me to the point of my first letter.

There is something, I venture to say it, radically wrong in this system of illustration.

Let me explain how we view the matter in England, and quote from an article in the London *Athenæum* of October 12th, 1872. Speaking of the prevailing system of book and newspaper illustration, we say this: "The great want at this time is a simpler and better form of illustration for novels, tales, magazines, newspapers and literature of the butterfly kind. The present system is too cumbrous, too costly, and too absurd to last. It is an absurdity, for instance, committed every day, to engrave an elaborate drawing of furniture, made out to the exact square of a page, for the purpose of expressing a lover's devotion; or, worse still, to make a careful view of Hyde Park in London, as the ground-work for a pun. But the remedy for this is in the artist's hands alone. What we ask for, and often ask in vain, is better work and less of it—cleverer drawings or sketches

on paper, if need be, that can be reproduced *fac-simile* at the least cost. Half the common accessories to subject pictures are worthless, and the working-up of effects, as it is called (consequent often upon imperfect outline), a mere waste of time, the cost of engraving which discourages enterprise in publishers, and sometimes puts them into the *Gazette*." These were my words, as nearly as I can recollect them, written in England, with the sorrows of editing an illustrated magazine still fresh upon the mind. They were meant to apply only to that country (for France, with Cham, Randon, &c., has long been ahead in this matter), but on arrival in America they appear more to the point than ever. I do not, it is true, find want of enterprise anywhere, nor much fear of what in England we call "fear of the *Gazette*," but I do find the same waste of power and misdirection of talent that is conspicuous in London.

To works of great and permanent value these remarks do not, of course, apply; but the mass of illustration which issues daily from your wonderful press, is neither intended to be permanent nor required to be valuable. The average life of an illustrated book is three years, and of a newspaper a week. Let us then look the matter in the face, and ask our draughtsmen if they cannot give us *better work* and *less of it*. There is more interest in a clever outline (or in a drawing in black which depends solely upon the truth of outline) by your artist Thomas Nast, than in a multitude of labored, and in some respects more artistic engravings. The remark applies equally to comic and serious drawings.

I have spoken of an American artist. Let me point out what we are doing in England. Since the days of John Leech, who could throw a bloom over the face of an English girl with one stroke of the pencil—with one



line only—we have had no such master of this art. John Tenniel is wonderfully humorous, but his genius lies chiefly in the direction of cartoon drawing, and he wants flexibility. Charles Keene, also a great humorist, is our best draughtsman for *chiaroscuro*. George Du Maurier is cultivated and refined, but his work appears labored amongst caricatures in a weekly sheet. These are three of the principal members of the *Punch* staff in England, whose drawings I perceive you reproduce continually in your newspapers, and, therefore, it is fair to presume, admire them. But the younger school of draughtsmen, both in England and America, appear to be “all abroad,” and to lack, not industry or talent, but method.

What does our principal art journal, the London *Athenæum*, say on this point? “Why is not drawing in line with pen and ink taught in our own government schools of art? The present system in schools seems to render the art of drawing of as little use to the student as possible, for he has no sooner mastered the preliminary stage of drawing in outline from the flat with a lead pencil, than he has chalk put into his hand, a material which he will seldom or never use in turning his knowledge of drawing to practical account. The readier method of pen and ink would be of great service as a preparatory stage to wood drawing, but unfortunately *drawing is taught in most cases as though the student intended to become a painter.*”

This is in England; how is it in America? What is the meaning of all those chalk studies by students in your National Academy of Design? “To teach them to become painters,” is the reply. But where is your school for that active band of draughtsmen whose lives will be spent in supplying the feverish thirst of your people for drawings “taken on the spot,” as it is called; sketches

made on the ruins of smouldering cities and by the bedside of dying men? If ever there was a place and a people that should cultivate the art of sketching in line, that place surely is New York.

One of my first impressions of this city was the sorrowful face of a young student coming down the steps of the Academy, bearing in her hands a rejected work in chalk, a study, I presume, in the life school. Would not her chance of a living, one is inclined to ask, have been more hopeful if part of her year's labor had been devoted, like Albert Durer's, to rendering in a few noble lines the feathers of an eagle's wing; or, like Raffaele's, to the outline of the hand of a Madonna? I speak in ignorance of the fact of whether you have anywhere such schools; apparently you have not, but as a foreigner, ascending the steps of the National Academy for the first time, I look naturally for them in a building costing, I am told, \$250,000, and described by one of your writers as "the conspicuous home of art, the central depot of the works of American artists, and the pride and dignity of the metropolis."

And this brings me to the point of my first letter. The principal object of the Exhibition of Sketches, which, through the courtesy of the Council, is now in the Academy of Design, is "to encourage and develop, both in England and America, the art of sketching in line," and the triumph of that exhibition will be *the sketch that tells its story in the fewest lines*.



The following, taken lately in our London streets, is an example of power and faeial expression in sketching in line.



It is proposed hereafter, if these exhibitions find favor in America, to give a prize annually for the best work of this kind.

Bearing in mind that the daily newspaper of the future will undoubtedly be illustrated, and that the best qualified reporter for the press will be the best draughtsman as well as short-hand writer, the importance of cultivating the short-hand of pictorial art is greater than may appear at first sight. At present there are very few artists, either in America or in England, whose works bear being reproduced in *fac-simile*, and without at least some aid from the wood engraver. In France they are

more advanced, and from their schools, where etching has been brought to such perfection (of which the works of your countryman Whistler are such refined examples) we have at the present time the best artists in sketching in line. In England we are quietly training for this work, in anticipation of the perfection of a process (like the "Actinic") which shall reproduce a sketch for the printing-press without engraving.

But on this subject, and others of more general interest, but all bearing upon the artistic development of this country, I propose to speak further at a future time.

## II. SKETCHING IN WATER-COLORS.

### A VISIT TO THE ACADEMY.

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More than twenty years ago, an American gentleman, on a tour through Europe, chanced to be walking down a Highland glen, with a porter carrying his knapsack. It was one of those warm, still evenings in August, when the mist gathers slowly in the valleys and the tints are blended with a subtlety only to be seen in a cloudy land. As they were making a rapid descent, they came suddenly upon a party of six or eight ladies and gentlemen, seated in picnic fashion on a green slope.

Hurrying past them and down a loose, stony path, in order to reach a certain town before evening, some of the party called after them to halt for fear of disturbing two figures wrapped in gray plaids, seated side by side at a little distance below. The backs only of these two figures were visible as they sat on the grass, with the mists rising around them in a grey harmonious blend. One was the Queen of England, the other W. L. Leitch, a well-known water-color artist. A few weeks later the same American was staying with a London physician, whose annual holiday consisted of twenty-eight working days, and who showed with pride to his guest twenty-eight sketches in water-colors which marked his "holiday" for every year. The collection was accumulating

to an extent which amazed the possessor almost as much as his friend, and the progress from bad work to good was decided and gratifying.

The almost universal taste for water-color sketching in England, where holidays are scarce and rainy days occasional, leads me to suggest an extension of the practice amongst the American people in your long summer months, your bright, clear air and your grand landscape. I would not suggest that it should all at once become a fashion ; for, with all respect for the talent displayed by your water-color artists, *who would there be to teach?* Are there in New York, for instance, twenty men who can teach the water-color method so as to form a sound, natural, unaffected school of sketching, examples of which have just come from England and may be seen in the National Academy of Design?

This is of vital importance, and the question of *educating artists in the art of water-color drawing* seems to be at the root of the matter. One of your daily newspapers announced with undisguised satisfaction the other day, that "Mr. Blackburn's project for introducing water-colors into this country had been abandoned." The narrow-minded policy of a newspaper in attempting to discourage any efforts which would give impulse to the practice of this graceful art may be dismissed at once as an obvious blunder ; but when I read in an intelligent and critical review that the art "has not yet achieved a footing here," and further, that—

"Most of the artists whose works in water-colors attracted so much notice at each succeeding annual exhibition, have nearly, or altogether, retired from the field in which they roamed so pleasantly, and gathered such charming bouquets for a few seasons. Few things can be more discouraging to a worker than to be told that his productions are exquisite in their way, but that they

are not precisely the kind of thing wanted. And this is just the case with regard to most of our essayists in water-colors. They have found, generally speaking, so little sale for their productions that they do not deem it prudent to devote themselves further to water-color art."

I confess there seems to be something wrong, and as if some contrary influences were at work; some mysterious *Deusex machina* who stands in the gap at this critical juncture and would rather throw "oil" on the troubled "waters!"

But what should be dreaded most in this matter is, not so much the degeneracy of water-color art into the reproduction of a few pretty drawings in the style of Birket Foster, Richardson, Rowbotham and the like—which are never worth anything unless by these artists themselves—but rather, as I said above, the terrible consequences of water-color sketching *becoming a fashion before its time*.

The thing must work gradually; the taste must be developed, and the practice commenced, deliberately.

An important step was taken on Wednesday night last, when your art-loving people were brought face to face with new work and new methods in the collection of water-color sketches and drawings in the National Academy of Design. It is a collection which represents, in a modest and limited sense, the great English school of water-colors, of which your dealers provide you from time to time most satisfactory—if costly—examples. It is "a message from the sea," a curious wave of art beating upon your shores, which will wear away by slow degrees the rock of popular prejudice in favor of well-known names. Instead of "great names," there is some "great" work which I scarcely hoped to see this year in New York.

These English pictures have come spontaneously from all parts of England in answer to the announcement by telegraph that your National Academy would exhibit them—that, in short, they would be welcome in America. They were not collected to attract purchasers, nor to compete with the picture-dealing business in any way, for being sent here at the artists' prices, it is quite open to any dealer to purchase them who has sufficient knowledge of the subject to guide him. The English artists whose works are to be seen in this country for the first time (and which I had not seen until they arrived in New York) do not ask you to judge them by the names to be found in the catalogue, nor by the frames in which, for sake of economy, they are now exhibited, but to *take them on their merits*.

It would be out of place for me to give a detailed criticism of these works, which have been collected in this exceptional and hurried manner, as an experiment to be continued annually, if successful; but, for the benefit of the public, who will like to know who some of the artists are, and also for the information of the art-critic of the *Tribune*, who said that in the whole collection there was “not a single eminent name,” I will add the names of some of the English and foreign artists whose works are now in the National Academy of Design, including members of the Royal Academy and the two Societies of Painters in Water-colors in England. Amongst them are Redgrave, R.A., Mortimer, R.A., the late J. W. M. Turner, R.A., the late Sir Thomas Lawrence, Henry Warren, William Callow, F. W. Burton, Copley Fielding, Collingwood Smith, John Ruskin, S. Prout, Burgess, Pugin, Mogford, Richardson, Croft, Armstrong, Bowers, DuMaurier, Fildes, Small, Regamey and Gustave Doré.



But let us glance at the exhibition, the most interesting part of which consists in drawings by comparatively unknown artists. On entering the galleries it is a pleasure to find that the best modern work is to be found in the American collection, at least it is the best for our purpose of exhibiting the capabilities of water-colors as compared with oil painting. It is by an Englishman of the modern and refined school of art in which Frederick Walker, A.R.A., and another young artist, Mason (lately dead), have made such conspicuous success in England.

It is called "The Rival Florists" (40), by E. K. Johnson, and will be identified at once among the American pictures by its curiously delicate key of color and by its unadorned deal frame. It is a picture of calm summer garden life in England, refined and sympathetic in treatment and full of the poetry of nature. Looking at it critically the artist will detect certain faults of composition and a glaring anachronism in the costumes of the figures, but if he examine it he will find it a lesson in color of the most novel and attractive kind. As a whole, it is a triumph of execution in water colors, and exhibits, as we said, more good qualities than any work in the English collection. Those who do not care as a rule for such pictures, may carry away in their memories the charm of its color, the sense of its humor and the beauty of its clustering flowers: and will not ask whether the artist has, or has not, a great name. Near this picture, on the same line, is a work (36) already described in the *Evening Post* as "a superb architectural drawing representing a market scene in front of the old Frauen Kirche, Nuremberg, by the celebrated English aquarellist, J. Skinner Prout." The American Society of Painters in Water Colors have done good service by

hanging these two pictures so prominently in their collection, also another in the East room (117) by F. W. Burton ; a Roman maiden with her distaff, seated upon a ruined capitol overgrown with leaves ; but these two latter artists are not fairly represented here. Thus, the drawings by J. S. Prout, which have been sent from England (Nos. 454 and 406), may be noticed as more satisfactory, if less ambitious, specimens of his work ; and the drawing by F. W. Burton, one of our leading water-color artists who has lately seceded from the old society and no longer exhibits his own pictures, is not a good specimen of his powers. Of the eastern scenes by Tiffany, the brilliant *tours de force* of Mrs. Murray, a well-known English artist ; the "Horse Race in the Yosemite Valley," by J. G. Smillie ; "The Queen of the Vintage," by W. H. Powell, and of other remarkable pictures the public will have been well-informed by your art critics, and I will not venture to question their general verdict.

But here and there, scattered through these galleries, there are some drawings (American or English it matters not) that strike a stranger fresh from the studios of the old world. Such, for instance, as "An Autumn River Side" (48), by T. C. Farrer ; a bold, free study from nature (63), by L. C. Tiffany ; a little sketch by De Haas (26) ; and views by Gifford, Bellows, J. M. Falconer, W. T. Richards, &c. Turn back for a moment and examine a sketch "On the Medway" (24), unfortunately placed, of colliers and barges, with a view across the river half shrouded under a veil of cloud ; true in atmospheric effect, simple and straightforward in its rendering of detail and in the drawing of clumsy barges with their heavy keel boards ; it is one of the most noteworthy sketches in the Academy. As an instance of promising

work in water-colors by one of your younger men, attention should be drawn to a sketch from nature by J. C. Nicoll (42), and to the good drawing of waves in his "Calm Morning" (41). This method of work, like that of Tiffany, is more applicable to oil painting; but whilst Nicoll seems to be overcoming his difficulties Tiffany appears to revel in them. Of the large frame in one of the places of honor in the north room, "On the Meadows of Old Newburyport" (85), by A. T. Bricher, it is scarcely fair to speak, being, it is understood, the artist's first important work in water-colors, but it has qualities that the visitor should not neglect to notice.

There are several drawings in the east room which deserve especial mention: such, for instance, as a sketch of a tomb, by R. Swain Gifford (112), and 184, by the same artist; "An old Spanish town," by S. Colman (114); "Night," from a city window (145), by J. M. Falconer; a study from nature, "Adirondaeks" (171), J. D. Smillie; and in the north-west room, an architectural sketch (336), by Mrs. Murray. In the painting of flowers and leaves your artists appear to work with a true love of nature, and to excel in their natural grouping and arrangement; in this last particular English artists have yet much to learn. We must not leave the American gallery without noticing "Snowbirds" (132), by F. Bridges, a drawing which I should like to have had an opportunity of purchasing for our Dudley gallery in England, as an example of grace and simple treatment. It is a modest little sketch of some half frozen birds, clinging to a spray already weighed down with snow. There is a delicacy of tone and sympathetic treatment here which leaves nothing to be desired.

In the large room which comprises the principal part of the English collection I will merely allude to one or

two artists as representatives of the kind of work which we are anxious to popularize in this country. The first is a sketch of sea breaking over the rocks on the coast of Cornwall, by Arthur Severn (450), the waves thrown up into the air by the wind as we often see it but seldom dare to paint; also "A Sunset in Algeria" (430), by the same artist, a study of palms with their bronzed plumage casting fantastic shadows on the walls of a tomb in an Arab cemetery. Next, look at the drawing of clouds in a sea piece by G. L. Hall (424), "The hollow ocean ridges roaring unto cataracts;" also at the poetical treatment of "Sundown" (411), by J. Mogford, and turn from them to the peaceful sketches of English homesteads, country lanes and hedge rows. Take refuge for an hour in this gallery from the hurry of New York city, from its hard work and its harder pleasures, and see the rain clouds clearing over a cornfield and floating through a valley in Devonshire (356); or better, look at the old tumble-down cottages overgrown and time-stained in such drawings as 372 and 381; and at 393, where the breeze is blowing freshly across a Warwickshire field-path. Examine the drawing and atmospheric gradations in some of the mountain scenes in Wales and Scotland; the masterly little sketch by the late Copley Fielding (414); and other curious unobtrusive examples of English art which have come to America for the first time, sketches made and sent to you direct from

"The silence of thatched cottages  
And the voices of blossoming fields."

Of the collection of works in black and white (which would have been better for study if they had all been arranged in one room), I may have an opportunity of speaking in connection with the various processes for

their reproduction by the printing press in this country. The allusion in my first letter to "the shorthand of pictorial art," and the suggestion that "the daily newspaper of the future would be illustrated," have attracted so much notice from the press in America that I would direct the especial attention of artists to the beautiful etchings and drawings in the corridors, some of which have been lent by our London *Graphic* for the purpose of study; also, to the two great works by Gustave Doré, illustrating Victor Hugo's "Toilers of the Sea," which are probably finer than any that have been seen in this country. They were done at a time when he was making his great reputation in Europe, and when his powers were at their best.

At the commencement of this letter I alluded to "amateur sketching" without having had an opportunity of learning how far the practice has already taken root in America. The first impression is that there is, as I said, much to be taught and learned in this direction amongst the younger generation, both of artists and amateurs, and that the quiet contemplation of such works as are now in the National Academy of Design will do much to foster a taste for this fascinating art.

HENRY BLACKBURN.

*New York, 12th Feb., 1873.*







